

## Pence: Trump is 'wrong' to say election could be overturned

By JILL COLVIN  
Associated Press

Former Vice President Mike Pence on Friday directly rebutted Donald Trump's false claims that Pence somehow could have overturned the results of the 2020 election, saying that the former president was simply "wrong."

In a speech to a gathering of the conservative Federalist Society in Florida, Pence addressed Trump's intensifying efforts this week to advance the false narrative that, as vice president, he had the unilateral power to prevent Joe Biden from taking office.

"President Trump is wrong," Pence said. "I had no right to overturn the election."

While Pence has previously defended his actions on Jan. 6 and said that he

and Trump will likely never see "eye to eye" on what happened that day, the remarks Friday marked his most forceful rebuttal of Trump to date. And they come as Pence has been laying the groundwork for a potential run for president in 2024, which could put him in direct competition with his former boss, who has also been teasing a comeback run.

Trump this week had escalated his attacks against Pence. In a statement Tuesday, Trump had said the committee investigating the deadly Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol should instead probe "why Mike Pence did not send back the votes for recertification or approval."

Continued on next page



Former Vice President Mike Pence speaks at the National Press Club in Washington, Nov. 30, 2021. Associated Press

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**Continued from Front**

And on Sunday, he blasted Pence, falsely declaring that "he could have overturned the Election!"

Vice presidents play only a ceremonial role in the the counting of Electoral College votes, and any attempt to interfere in the count would have represented a profound break from precedent and democratic norms.

Pence, in his remarks Friday, described Jan. 6, 2021, as "a dark day in the history of the United States Capitol" and framed his actions that day as in line with his duty as a constitutional conservative.

"The American people must know that we will always keep our oath to the Constitution, even when it would be politically expedient to do otherwise," he told the group Friday. He noted that, under Article II Section One of the Constitution, "elections are conducted at the state level, not by the Congress" and that "the only role of Congress with respect to the Electoral College is to open and count votes submitted and certified by the states. No more, no less."

He went on to call out those who have insisted that isn't the case. "Frankly there is no idea more un-American than the notion that any one person could choose the American president," he added. "Under the Con-



**Former President Donald Trump speaks at a rally, Saturday, Jan. 29, 2022, in Conroe, Texas.**

**Associated Press**

stitution, I had no right to change the outcome of our election. And Kamala Harris will have no right to overturn the election when we beat them in 2024."

The audience applauded Pence's line about beating the Democrats in the upcoming presidential election, but remained silent when Pence said earlier that "Trump is wrong."

Pence was inside the Capitol on Jan. 6, presiding over the joint session of Congress to certify the presidential election, when a mob of Trump's supporters violently smashed inside, assaulting police officers and hunting down lawmakers. Pence, who had released a letter

moments before the session got underway that made clear he had no authority to overturn the will of the voters, was rushed to safety as some rioters chanted "Hang Mike Pence!"

Pence, in his remarks Friday, acknowledged the lingering anger among many in Trump's base, even as he said it was time "to focus on the future."

"The truth is, there's more at stake than our party or political fortunes," he said. "Men and women, if we lose faith in the Constitution, we won't just lose elections — we'll lose our country."

Trump's escalating rhetoric comes as he has been un-

der growing scrutiny from the House committee investigating the attack. The panel has interviewed hundreds of witnesses, issued dozens of subpoenas and obtained reams of government documents that Trump tried to keep hidden. It also comes as a bipartisan group of lawmakers has been pushing to update the Electoral Count Act to eliminate any ambiguity about the vice president's role.

While a basic declaration of fact, Pence's decision to describe Trump as "wrong" was especially significant given Pence's own posture in the White House. As Trump's vice president,

Pence was exceptionally deferential to him, never publicly voicing disagreement and defending even his most controversial actions.

Pence has so far tried to thread a needle on his actions Jan. 6, which continue to enrage large portions of Trump's base, posing a potential complication if he runs for president in 2024.

In recent months, he has generally refrained from voluntarily raising the events of that day but has defended his actions when pressed, saying he was abiding by his constitutional role and was "proud" of the actions taken by Congress that day.

"I will always be proud that we did our part on that tragic day to reconvene the Congress and fulfilled our duty under the Constitution and the laws of the United States," he said in one speech last year.

He has also accused Democrats and the media of continuing to focus on the insurrection to score political points against Republicans and divert attention from Biden's agenda.

Pence has been traveling the country, visiting early voting states, delivering speeches and hosting fundraisers for midterm candidates. Pence, unlike some possible 2024 presidential contenders, has notably declined to rule out running against Trump. □

## IRS offering Saturday walk-in help this tax season



**This April 13, 2014, file photo shows the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) headquarters building in Washington.**

**Associated Press**

**By FATIMA HUSSEIN**

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — The IRS will begin offering taxpayers limited Saturday walk-in help this tax sea-

son.

Thirty-five tax assistance centers around the country will be open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the sec-

ond Saturday of the next four months, the agency said Friday. This comes after the IRS nixed walk-in visits during the pandemic, and limited service to appointments only.

Beginning Feb. 12, taxpayers will be able to have their questions answered in person at centers in locations including Birmingham, Alabama; Los Angeles, Washington D.C. and Seattle. Other Saturday sessions will be offered on March 12, April 9 and May 14. The effort is meant to help taxpayers who need face-to-face assistance, said Sue Simon, a director of customer assistance at the IRS who will also serve as a Saturday volunteer. She said people who don't traditionally file taxes may need help claiming credits includ-

ing Child Tax Credit payments.

People visiting the IRS should bring photo IDs, social security cards for all household members and any IRS letters or notices.

The agency announced earlier this week that it is reassigning 1,200 workers to help process tax returns. The agency has been struggling to administer pandemic programs with historically low staffing levels while processing multiple seasons' tax returns.

During the 2020 budget year, the IRS processed more than 240 million tax returns and issued roughly \$736 billion in refunds, including \$268 billion in stimulus payments, according to the latest IRS data. In that same time frame, some 59 million people called or visited an IRS office. □



# U.S. death toll from COVID-19 hits 900,000, sped by omicron

By MARK KENNEDY and KEN SWEET

Associated Press

Propelled in part by the wildly contagious omicron variant, the U.S. death toll from COVID-19 hit 900,000 on Friday, less than two months after eclipsing 800,000.

The two-year total, as compiled by Johns Hopkins University, is greater than the population of Indianapolis, San Francisco, or Charlotte, North Carolina.

The milestone comes more than 13 months into a vaccination drive that has been beset by misinformation and political and legal strife, though the shots have proved safe and highly effective at preventing serious illness and death.

"It is an astronomically high number. If you had told most Americans two years ago as this pandemic was getting going that 900,000 Americans would die over the next few years, I think most people would not have believed it," said Dr. Ashish K. Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health.

He noted that most of the deaths happened after the vaccine gained authorization.

"We got the medical science right. We failed on the social science. We failed on how to help people get vaccinated, to combat disinformation, to not politicize this," Jha said.

"Those are the places where we have failed as America."

Just 64% of the population is fully vaccinated, or about 212 million Americans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We have underestimated our enemy here, and we have under-prepared to protect ourselves," said



Kristin Travis, a community outreach doula, holds a home COVID-19 test kit Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022, while picking up supplies at Open Arms Perinatal Services before going out to visit some of her clients in Seattle.

Associated Press

Dr. Joshua M. Sharfstein, a public health professor at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "We've learned a tremendous amount of humility in the face of a lethal and contagious respiratory virus."

Nor is COVID-19 finished with the United States. Dr. Andrew Noymer, a professor of public health at the University of California at Irvine, predicted the U.S. will hit 1 million deaths by March 1.

"I think it's important for us not to be numbed. Each one of those numbers is someone," said the Rev. Gina Anderson-Cloud, senior pastor of Fredericksburg United Methodist Church in Virginia. "Those are mothers, fathers, children, our elders."

While omicron is loosening its grip on the U.S., with new cases plunging in recent weeks and the number of Americans in the hospi-

tal with COVID-19 turning downward, deaths are running at more than 2,400 per day on average, the highest level since last winter.

Despite its wealth and its world-class medical institutions, the U.S. has the highest reported toll of any country, and even then, the real number of lives lost directly or indirectly to the coronavirus is thought to be significantly higher.

Experts believe some COVID-19 deaths have been misattributed to other conditions. And some Americans are thought to have died of chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes because they were unable or unwilling to obtain treatment during the crisis.

Anderson-Cloud lost her dementia-stricken father after he was hospitalized for cancer surgery and then isolated in a COVID-19 ward. He went into cardiac arrest, was revived, but died about a week later.

She had planned to be by his bedside, but the rules barred her from going to the hospital. She wonders if his condition was made worse by his isolation. She wonders if he was scared. She wonders how many other cases like his there are.

"There are all these stories and all that pain," she said. COVID-19 has become one of the top three causes of death in America, behind the big two — heart disease and cancer. Noymer said if the mortality rate from COVID-19 continues, it will shave up to two years

off U.S. life expectancy.

Ja said he and other medical professionals are frustrated that policymakers are seemingly running out of ideas for getting people to roll up their sleeves.

"There aren't a whole lot of tools left. We need to double down and come up with new ones," he said.

When the vaccine was rolled out in mid-December 2020, the death toll stood at about 300,000. It hit 600,000 in mid-June 2021 and 700,000 on Oct. 1. On Dec. 14, it reached 800,000. It took just 51 more days to get to 900,000, the fastest 100,000-death jump since last winter.

The latest 100,000 deaths encompass those caused by both the delta variant and omicron, which began spreading rapidly in December and became the predominant version in the U.S. before the month was out.

While omicron has proved less likely to cause severe illness than delta, the sheer number of people who became infected with omicron contributed to the high number of deaths.

"We have been fighting among ourselves about tools that actually do save lives. Just the sheer amount of politics and misinformation around vaccines, which are remarkably effective and safe, is staggering," Sharfstein said.

He added: "This is the consequence." □

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# News Corp. hacked, reporters targeted; believed China-linked

**Associated Press**

**WASHINGTON (AP)** — News Corp., publisher of The Wall Street Journal, said Friday that it had been hacked and had data stolen from journalists and other employees, and a cybersecurity firm investigating the intrusion said Chinese intelligence-gathering was believed behind the operation.

The Journal, citing people briefed on the intrusion, reported that it appeared to date back to February 2020 and that scores of employees were impacted. It quoted them as saying the hackers were able to access reporters' emails and Google Docs, including drafts of articles.

News Corp., whose publications and businesses include the New York Post and Journal parent Dow Jones, said it discovered the breach on Jan. 20. It said customer and financial data were so far not affected and company operations were not interrupted.

But the potential impact on news reporting and sources was a serious concern. News organizations are prime targets for the



The News Corporation headquarters building is seen Aug. 1, 2017, in New York.

**Associated Press**

world's intelligence agencies because their reporters are in constant contact with sources of sensitive information. Journalists and newsrooms from Mexico and El Salvador to Qatar, where Al-Jazeera is based, have been hacked with powerful spyware.

Mandiant, the cybersecurity firm examining the hack, said in a statement that it "assesses that those behind

this activity have a China nexus, and we believe they are likely involved in espionage activities to collect intelligence to benefit China's interests."

The timing of News Corp.'s announcement, including in a regulatory filing Friday, coincided with the opening of the Winter Olympics in Beijing, to which foreign athletes and journalists were advised to bring

"burner" phones and sanitized laptops to protect against cyberespionage.

In the regulatory filing, News Corp. said it had discovered in January that one of its technology providers was "the target of persistent cyberattack activity." It did not elaborate.

In an email to staff, News Corp. said the hack "affected a limited number" of email accounts and

documents from News Corp. headquarters, News Technology Services, Dow Jones, News UK, and New York Post.

"Our preliminary analysis indicates that foreign government involvement may be associated with this activity, and that some data was taken," the email said. "Our highest concern is the protection of our employees, including our journalists, and their sources," it added, saying it believed the "threat activity is contained."

FBI Director Christopher Wray said in a speech this week that the bureau opens investigations tied to suspected Chinese espionage operations about every 12 hours, and has more than 2,000 such probes. He said Chinese government hackers have been pilfering more personal and corporate data than all other countries combined.

While state-backed Russian hacking tends to get more headlines, U.S. officials say China has been stealthily stealing far more valuable commercial and personal data over the past few decades as digital technology took hold. □

## NYPD honors whistleblower Frank Serpico — 50 years late



Retired New York City Police Officer Frank Serpico speaks to reporters after a rally to show support for Colin Kaepernick, Aug. 19, 2017, in New York.

**Associated Press**

**NEW YORK (AP)** — More than 50 years after Frank Serpico testified about endemic corruption in the New York Police Department, the department finally recognized his service and injury in the line of

duty with an official certificate and inscribed medal of honor. The former undercover detective, 85, received the honor in the mail Thursday, the New York Daily News reported. Serpico testified in De-

cember 1971 to a panel appointed by Mayor John Lindsay to investigate police corruption, breaking the "blue wall of silence," the protection that fellow officers sometimes give each other, such as refusing to testify.

Al Pacino went on to portray him in the hit 1973 movie "Serpico," and his story is also relayed in a book by Peter Maas.

Current Daily News and former Associated Press reporter Larry McShane interviewed Serpico in December about the 50th anniversary of his appearance before the Knapp Commission.

"I felt that finally I was going to tell the world and nobody's going to interrupt me," Serpico told the newspaper, speaking from

his home in upstate New York. "I thought, 'I know the truth.' ... Every single word was mine, and it came from the heart."

Serpico was shot in the face during a drug arrest in Brooklyn in 1971 months before he testified and has maintained that the other officers he was with never made a call for an "officer down."

While the department gave Serpico a medal recognizing his injury in 1972, it was handed over without ceremony or the accompanying certificate, he told the newspaper.

In recent years, the department has awarded medals to recipients at annual large public events. Mayor Eric Adams responded to the coverage, saying Serpico's "bravery

inspired my law enforcement career. Frank — we're going to make sure you get your medal."

On Thursday, Serpico tweeted a photo of the framed medal of honor and certificate that reads in part, "in recognition of an individual act of extraordinary bravery performed in the line of duty." He has continued to speak out against corruption and abuse by the police since his retirement in 1972 and says he has supported and listened to other whistleblowers over the years, including those who testified about the now-terminated stop-and-frisk policy.

In 2017, he publicly supported quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who protested against racial injustice while playing in the NFL. □



# Russia, China push back against U.S. in pre-Olympics summit

By KEN MORITSUGU

Associated Press

**BEIJING (AP)** — The leaders of Russia and China pushed back against U.S. pressure on Friday, declaring their opposition to any expansion of NATO and affirming that the island of Taiwan is a part of China, as they met hours before the Winter Olympics kicked off in Beijing.

Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping issued a joint statement highlighting what they called "interference in the internal affairs" of other states, as both leaders face criticism from Washington over their foreign and domestic policies. "Some forces representing a minority on the world stage continue to advocate unilateral approaches to resolving international problems and resort to military policy," it read, in a thinly veiled reference to the U.S. and its allies. The two leaders are looking to project themselves as a counterweight to the U.S.-led bloc, as China shows growing support for Moscow in its dispute with Ukraine that threatens to break out into armed conflict.

China and Russia are committed to "deepening back-to-back strategic cooperation," Xi was quoted as telling Putin.

"This is a strategic decision that has far-reaching influence on China, Russia and the world," Xi said, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

Faced with a "complex and evolving international situation," the two sides "strongly support each other" in confronting what Xi called "regional security threats" and "international strategic stability," without directly naming the U.S.

Putin is the highest-profile guest at the Beijing Games following the decision by the U.S., Britain and others not to send officials in protest of China's human rights abuses and its treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities.

Putin praised "unprecedented" close relations with China, in his opening



Chinese President Xi Jinping, right, and Russian President Vladimir Putin pose for a photo prior to their talks in Beijing, China, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022.

Associated Press

remarks to Xi carried by Russian television.

Relations "are developing in a progressive way with a spirit of friendship and strategic partnership," Putin said.

"They have indeed become unprecedented."

Putin highlighted close economic ties, including a new contract to supply China with 10 billion cubic meters of gas per year from eastern Russian.

"For our meeting today, our oilmen have prepared very good new solutions for the supply of hydrocarbons to the People's Republic of China, and another step forward has been taken in the gas industry," Putin said. Russia has long been a key supplier of oil, gas and coal for China's massive economy, now the world's second largest, along with food and other raw materials.

China's state-run news agency reported the two leaders met at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse Friday afternoon, but gave no details.

They did not appear to shake hands when greeting each other due to COVID-19 precautions.

Putin also recalled his presence in Beijing for the 2008 Summer Olympics, and the Chinese delegation's attendance at Russia's 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, call-

ing such exchanges "to a certain extent a tradition."

Kevin Rudd, president of the Asia Society and former Australian prime minister, called Beijing's backing of Moscow over NATO expansion "highly significant."

"It puts at risk China's wider relationship with the Europeans," Rudd said. "But Xi believes he is now powerful enough and has sufficient economic leverage with Europe to get away with it. It also signifies that China now sees itself as a global, not just a regional, security actor."

The discussions mark the two leaders' first in-person meeting since 2019 and come as China and Russia increasingly align their foreign policies bilaterally and in world bodies such as the United Nations, in opposition to the Western bloc and other major powers.

Speaking to reporters after the talks, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that Putin and Xi discussed "the tensions deliberately incited by the West around the Russian Federation and China."

Leaders of the five ex-Soviet Central Asian nations, which have close ties with both Russia and China, all followed Putin's lead in attending the Olympics opening, along with other states that have political and economic interests

with Beijing.

A buildup of more than 100,000 Russian troops near Ukraine has fueled Western fears that Moscow is poised to invade its neighbor. Russia has denied planning an offensive but urged the U.S. and its allies to provide a binding pledge that NATO won't expand to Ukraine and other ex-Soviet nations or deploy weapons there, and roll back its forces from Eastern Europe demands firmly rejected by the West. Putin and Xi accused NATO and the U.S.'s Indo-Pacific strategy of building closer military ties with other countries in Asia as destabilizing and threatening regional security.

"The parties oppose the further expansion of NATO, (and) call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon the ideological approaches of the Cold War," the joint statement said.

Speaking on MSNBC's Morning Joe program, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg rejected the criticism and described NATO's expansion to Central and Eastern Europe as a "a great success story" that "has helped to spread freedom and democracy across Europe."

"This is about respecting independent sovereign choices of independent nations, not returning to an age of spheres of influence

where big powers decide what small neighbors can do or not do," Stoltenberg said.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a call last week that Moscow's security concerns need to be addressed, a statement that marked a notable policy shift for Beijing.

Some observers suggested that Beijing is closely watching how the U.S. and its allies act in the standoff over Ukraine as it ponders further strategy on Taiwan, arguing that indecision by Washington could encourage China to grow more assertive.

The U.S. is Taiwan's main supplier of fighter aircraft and defensive arms and is legally bound to treat threats to the island democracy as matters of "grave concern."

The joint statement said that Russia reaffirms that Taiwan is an integral part of China and opposes Taiwan's independence in any form.

China claims the self-governing island as its own territory, to be annexed by force if necessary.

Economic and diplomatic cooperation has expanded into the military field in recent years, as Russia and China have held a series of joint war games, including naval drills and patrols by long-range bombers over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea.

In August, Russian troops for the first time deployed to Chinese territory for joint maneuvers.

Putin has also noted that Russia has been sharing highly sensitive military technologies with China that helped significantly bolster its defense capability. □





# Myanmar piles on 11th corruption charge against Suu Kyi

By **GRANT PECK**

**Associated Press**

**BANGKOK (AP)** — Police in Myanmar have filed an 11th corruption charge against Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's elected leader who was ousted from power by a military takeover a year ago, state-controlled media reported Friday.

The Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper reported that Suu Kyi was being charged under the Anti-Corruption Law covering bribery, which carries a maximum prison term of 15 years.

Suu Kyi has faced a raft of charges since she was taken into custody when the military seized power on Feb. 1 last year. Her supporters and human rights groups say the cases against her are baseless, and have been contrived to bar her return to politics and participation in a new election the army has promised by 2023.

Suu Kyi has already been sentenced to six years' imprisonment after be-



In this Dec. 11, 2019, file photo, Myanmar's leader Aung San Suu Kyi waits to address judges of the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands.

ing convicted of illegally importing and possessing walkie-talkies and violating coronavirus restrictions.

She is also being tried on the charge of violating the Official Secrets Act, which carries a maximum sentence of 14 years. Australian economist Sean Turnell,

who was her advisor, is a co-defendant.

A court session in the capital Naypyitaw in the secrets case was postponed Thursday because the 76-year-old Suu Kyi was suffering from low blood pressure, causing dizziness, said a person familiar with the

proceedings, speaking on condition of anonymity because the hearings are closed.

But she was back in court Friday when hearings began on five corruption charges related to granting permission to rent and buy a helicopter.

**Associated Press**

Her health elicited a statement of concern from the group ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights.

"It's a matter of international concern that Aung San Suu Kyi is reportedly too ill to attend her court hearing, the second time this has happened," said a statement from its chairperson, Malaysian lawmaker Charles Santiago.

"She has been imprisoned without just cause for more than a year now, with access to her heavily restricted, apart from her lawyers who are reportedly banned from speaking to the media, raising serious concerns regarding her access to adequate medical care."

Santiago said the situation made it urgent that Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, the special envoy to Myanmar appointed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, make arrangements to visit her. Myanmar's military government has so far barred anyone from visiting her. □

# EU slaps sanctions on 5 top Mali officials, including PM



Col. Assimi Goita, who declared himself the leader of the National Committee for the Salvation of the People, arrives to meet with a regional delegation at the Ministry of Defense in the capital Bamako, Mali, Aug. 14, 2020.

**Associated Press**

By **LORNE COOK**

**BRUSSELS (AP)** — The European Union on Friday imposed sanctions on five senior members of Mali's transitional government, including Prime Minister Choguel Maiga, accusing them of working to obstruct and undermine the transition from military to civilian

rule.

The move comes days after Mali coup leaders ordered France's ambassador to leave in what was the latest episode in a growing diplomatic crisis between the impoverished Sahel region country, its African neighbors and European partners. But the sanctions

weren't linked to the expulsion.

Others hit by the EU's asset freezes and travel bans include members of the inner circle of Col. Assimi Goita, who put himself in charge last year after dismissing the civilian leaders of Mali's transitional government. EU citizens and companies are forbidden to grant the five access to funds.

Tensions escalated further, notably with the EU and other international partners, when Goita postponed the next presidential vote by four years, until 2026. The West African regional group ECOWAS imposed tough economic sanctions in response, and the Europeans are following suit.

Maiga is said by the EU to be "directly responsible for postponing the elections foreseen in the Transition Charter, and he is therefore obstructing and undermining the successful comple-

tion of the political transition of Mali."

In December, the EU also slapped sanctions on eight people and three oil companies linked to the Wagner Group of Russian mercenaries, which is currently operating in Mali and stands accused of rights abuses in the Central African Republic, Libya and Syria.

Mali has struggled to contain an extremist insurgency since 2012. Rebels were forced from power in northern cities with the help of a French-led military operation, but they regrouped in the desert and began attacking the Malian army and its allies.

Insecurity has worsened with attacks on civilians and United Nations peacekeepers. The EU has been training the Mali armed forces since 2013. It had planned to continue to do so despite the severe instability and political upheav-

al.

But the expulsion of France's envoy is raising questions about the viability of the mission, as well as the future of the European-led military task force known as Takuba.

Last week, the Malian government ordered Danish soldiers out of the country just as they arrived to join the task force.

Norway has since reversed a decision to take part, and Germany is debating what to do about its contingent. Tense ties with the junta in Mali are posing France one of its toughest challenges in Africa in years. Thousands of French troops are stationed there, and make up the core of a major international anti-terrorism operation in the increasingly restive Sahel region; a fertile breeding ground for extremists.

Any decision by France to pull its troops out would shake up the region. □



# Argentina reels as toxic batch of cocaine kills at least 23

By DÉBORA REY and VICTOR CAIVANO

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina

(AP) — A batch of cocaine that has killed at least 23 people in Argentina appears to have been laced with a synthetic opioid, and police are scrambling to get as much of it off the streets as they can.

Health authorities say at least 84 people have been hospitalized after using the contaminated cocaine, some of whom remain on life-saving respiratory support. The victims were mostly young Argentines from poor neighborhoods around the nation's capital, Buenos Aires.

Police and public officials said that Argentina has never before suffered a drug-poisoning tragedy of this scale. Coverage of the deadly cocaine led national television broadcasts and was atop every newspaper.

Allan Santillán, 19, smoked the cocaine Tuesday night before going to sleep and his mother, a nurse, rushed him to a public hospital early the next morning.

"I woke up with my liver shot to hell, vomiting, and with stomach pains," Santillán told The Associated Press in an interview at the hospital.



Riot policemen stand guard during an operation in the Villa Sarmiento shanty town in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022, where it is believed people may have purchased contaminated cocaine.

Associated Press

His mother, Natalia Santillán, said she was relieved her son had survived, but lamented others' deaths.

"A lot of dead kids, it's all so sad," she said. "Something needs to be done, urgently."

Police had confiscated 15,000 small bags of the contaminated drug as of Thursday, and arrested seven people, Buenos Aires province's federal crimes unit said in a statement.

Toxicology tests to determine which substance was mixed with the cocaine haven't yet been completed. However, it appears to be a synthetic opioid used to intensify the effects of cocaine, according to Sergio Berni, security minister for the Buenos Aires province.

"Indirectly, we know it is an opioid, because the antidote is administered (to patients) and they react,"

Berni told reporters in the capital.

One of the people arrested was Joaquín Aquino, known as "El Paisa", who is the supposed leader of the drug ring that sold the cocaine, Berni told reporters. Authorities are investigating whether its toxic composition was accidental, or an attempt at score settling between rival gangs.

Aldo Saracco, president of Argentina's toxicology as-

sociation, told local television station Todo Noticias that — unlike in Europe and the U.S. — poisoning from synthetic opioids hadn't previously been witnessed in Argentina.

The number of deaths from drug poisoning involving cocaine in the U.S. has more than tripled from roughly 4,500 per year a decade ago, according to the 2020 national drug threat assessment report from the Drug Enforcement Agency.

Some Argentine lawmakers and television pundits made statements on Thursday questioning whether, in light of the incident, Argentina should consider legalizing some drugs.

The Center for Legal and Social Studies, a non-governmental research organization that advocates for legalization, said a change in approach toward personal consumption would enable greater oversight and inspection.

"Although prohibition is the rule almost everywhere in the world, alternative models that emerged several years ago address consumption from a rights perspective, leaving aside the criminal system," the group said in a statement. □

# Yacht reportedly built for Bezos too big for Dutch bridge

By ALEKSANDAR FURTULA and MIKE CORDER

ROTTERDAM, Netherlands

(AP) — A plan to temporarily dismantle a recently restored historic bridge in the heart of Dutch port city Rotterdam so that a huge yacht, reportedly being built for Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, can get to the North Sea is unlikely to be plain sailing.

Reports this week that the city had already agreed to take apart the Koningshaven Bridge, known locally as De Hef, sparked anger with one Facebook event set up calling for people to pelt the multimillion dollar yacht with rotten eggs.

However, a spokeswoman for Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb told The Associated

Press on Friday that while a request has been submitted by a shipbuilder for the bridge to temporarily be taken apart over the summer, no permit has yet been sought or granted.

"I think it's easy to understand why it's so controversial because this is a very beautiful, recently restored old bridge," said Rotterdam resident Lizette Touber. "It really is our heritage. And I think that if the rich can pay for it to be opened, which normally nobody else could do, then you get controversy."

In a written statement, Aboutaleb, who is on a visit to Colombia, said that once a request for a permit is submitted it will be assessed based on factors in-

cluding economic impact, environmental nuisance and possible risks to the "monumental structure" of the bridge.

"When the permit has been applied for, the municipality can make a decision about this, details can be further elaborated and a plan can be made in the event of a positive decision," the statement said.

The municipality declined to comment on who owns the yacht in question or identify the shipbuilder. An email sent to Amazon seeking comment went unanswered. The current Hef railway bridge was opened for trains to cross the Maas River in 1927 and taken out of service in 1993 when it was replaced by a tun-



View of the Koningshaven Bridge, known as De Hef, (The Lift), in Rotterdam, Netherlands, Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022.

Associated Press

nel. Public protests spared it from demolition and it eventually underwent a three-year renovation that ended in 2017. The middle

section of the bridge can be raised to allow ships to pass underneath, but apparently not high enough for the new yacht's masts. □



## Bohemian Restaurant & Bar, The Story: French Nomads in Culinary Avant-Garde

Like nomads travel from place to place to find fresh pasture for their livestock, the Nataf family –father Victor with sons David and Gregory - faithfully followed their nose for good food. As young boys, they indulged in their grandparent's culinary joie-de-vivre in the South of France. Ticked by the palette of excellent dishes prepared in their mid-seventies' restaurant in the Alps of France and filled with exquisite taste

of their other restaurants in the beautiful island of Porquerolles near St Tropez that made it to a ranking of 13/20 in the Gault Millau restaurant grading. To the Natafs, food is a bohemian experience\_ unconventional, eclectic and off the beaten track. Welcome to Bohemian Aruba!

A Grande entrée through a huge, wooden, Moroccan-style door takes you into a foodies Garden of

Eden. Big trees stand tall and proudly, lit with hanging lanterns creating a green and romantic lush paradise. There's a playful setting of different-styled tables, including seating under a Colombian Rattan tipi tent, complete the feel of let go alias laissez-faire. The cool bar blinks to New York loft style, think industrial bold. Waiters with hip suspenders and berets add a hint of French flair while lounge music fills the air. The décor is designed by David himself.

### David Nataf - Owner

"Thoughts of finger licking dishes fill my mind thinking of my youth. The smell of fresh-baked croissants and chocolate bread hand made by my uncle's brother in law's father "the baker". The restaurant's kitchen fridge stuffed with the most exquisite dishes that my brother and I consumed secretly after a night out to the frustration of the chef. We were young boys eating away the night with foie gras and loup de mer local branzino." Tongue melting fondue and raclette, wood oven pizzas with fresh Emmentaler cheese and hand-picked champignons founded his foodie character. Add this to the time he spent at the grandparents' house in the vineyards with fruits, veggies, poultry, and game

within hand's reach. What was missing was bought at the weekly farmers market. "I grew up with the farm-to-table concept."

### Le Magic

The family magic is translated through David into Bohemian. Starters like Vitello Tonnato, le Ceviche, homemade Foie Gras Terrine or Escargots "A la Bourguignonne" tickle your taste buds. For entrees Whole Shrimps Flambe with Cognac, Grilled 10oz Angus Rib Eye Steak "Maître d'Hôtel" or Braised Lamb Shank ignite passion in your soul. Spicy Moroccan Mahi-Mahi Kebab with chickpea hummus and ratatouille crumble, Paella made with their own fish broth filled with chicken seafood and chorizo are other culinary delights but there is much more. Wines are imported directly from France regions, as is the champagne. Italian, Span-

ish, American and Australian choices complete the list.

Raving reviews on a continuous basis prove that Bohemian has got it! Every Wednesday there is Live Flamenco with Angela Croes, on Thursdays you will enjoy the beautiful live sounds of Angela's violin and on Friday's and Saturday's go with the beat of electro lounge. Live salsa music can be enjoyed on Sunday's.

"Join our gypsy experience, travel with taste"

For reservations call +297 280 8448 or mail reservations@bohemianaruba.com or book through the website bohemianaruba.com.□



## Aruba Tourism Authority honors loyal visitors



**EAGLE BEACH** - Recently, Mr. Mario Arends had the great pleasure to honor a Loyal and friendly visitors of Aruba as Emerald Ambassadors and Distinguished Visitor at their home away from home. The symbolic honorary title is presented on behalf of the Minister of Tourism, as a token of appreciation to the guests who visit Aruba between 10-20-35 and more consecutive years.

The honorees were **Kurt Schmoelz and Norma Mackarous** from Quebec and Cora Willmann from Wisconsin

Mario Arends thanked them for choosing Aruba as their vacation destination and as their home away from home for so many years together with the members of La Cabana Beach.

Top reason for returning provided by the honorees were: Great weather, Safe island, people are like family and beautiful beaches.□





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## Covid Test Center at Paseo has the best experience!

**PALM BEACH - Don't spend a single moment of your long awaited holiday in Aruba thinking about your return testing. The Covid Test Center Aruba located at the Paseo Herencia Mall is your travel ally. Just sit back and relax knowing that, when the time comes, their professional staff will make this process a breeze for you. No need to make an appointment or dread the nasal swab; you'll be done with it in a matter of minutes and back to fun stuff.**

Some regions require proof or certification of negative COVID-19 status before allowing people into or out of the country. With rules and guidelines varying greatly from country to country, the safest approach is to have recent proof you are

COVID-19 negative before you get to the airport. Covid Test Center @ Paseo provides both PCR and Antigen type testing with results within hours; and both are accepted by the CDC. Covid Test Center @ Paseo is conveniently located at the Paseo Herencia Mall in the heart of the Palm Beach Strip and right across from the Playa Linda and Holiday Inn hotels; only two doors from T.G.I. Friday's. We are open seven days a week, between 9 am and 9 pm. This gives you the choice to walk in when it better suits you. It can be at the start or at the end of your day. No appointment needed here. The friendly technicians at Covid Test Center @ Paseo will take your information as we are aware it is imperative that this shows accu-

ately on the results. For a seamless process, please verify that you have provided the correct email to deliver the certificate. Said certificate can be printed at our offices should you wish to do so. We understand that nobody enjoys doing a nasal swab. That is why we take pride in our reputation of being the gentlest swabbers on the island. First, we will not rush you just to go to the next in line. Through clear given instructions we want you to feel comfortable. When you are ready, we will promptly but tenderly take a proper sample. Many elsewhere traumatized people praise the difference it makes to test with us.

Forget about counting hours before your flight, our turnaround is fast! For travel to the US, for example, a day before will suffice. A great game plan is to test first, then head out for an evening of dining, shopping and entertainment at the Paseo Herencia Mall, home of the water and lights show in the evenings. By the time you are back at the hotel, your results will be ready in your inbox. A PCR test costs \$75 and results are ready the next day, while Antigen test costs \$35 with same day results. If you are staying at an off-high-rise area property, you can benefit from the free parking our customers receive at the mall lot.). For more information follow us on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. □



Taste limitless possibilities at Infini, where Chef Urvin Croes and his team explores without boundaries and steps with both feet outside of the box to create his most sensational dishes yet. This meticulously designed restaurant located inside Blue Residences on scenic Eagle Beach is a chef's table concept with limited seating where diners are able to interact with the staff and other guests alike throughout the evening.

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**ORANJESTAD** — It was the official Grand Opening of Harbour House Aruba last Thursday, June 10th. The residence consisting of 94 units is located in the former Mar Azul building, right in the heart of Oranjestad. The two brothers Irwin J. Perret-Gentil and Alberto Perret-Gentil from PERING, one of the largest, privately-owned Real Estate and construction firms in Venezuela and Aruba, officially opened their new jewel in the presence of the invitees.

Harbour House Aruba is the ultimate smart investment or personal living space. A state-of-the-art lobby, an ocean-view gym, bar service, rooftop with 360 degrees view of Oranjestad, on-site parking, 24-hours security and a top floor lounge area with Jacuzzi's. Cherry on the cake: an infinity pool with a panorama on the harbour.

Harbour House Aruba offers cosmopolitan living in a beach-chic environment. The residence is fast-selling their studios, two-bedroom and three-bedroom units for many reasons but in a nutshell we can name: great location, great value for your money and great quality. To see exactly what still is available you may check the

## Harbour House Aruba officially open! 80 % sold, construction in final phase: Harbour House Aruba is ready for you!



website which shows you a map with sold and open units. Updates on construction are also on forehand. When you live abroad stopping by to check upon your purchase is not that simple, yet with the monthly updates on their website, it is a lot easier.

### Hottest condo in town

Aruba Today talked to one of the owners from New York: "This is going to be the hottest condo building on the island because this is the very first thing people see when they arrive here by cruise ship and it is the only one combining the ocean, port and city. We feel so happy to be the owner here, also, the organization is amazing. We are being accommodated in every way, the attention you get is extraordinary."

### Boardwalk

Living here includes being part of Oranjestad and all its benefits. Around the Harbour House building a boardwalk is constructed allowing you to stroll along the waterfront and enjoy a drink on a terrace or dive into the art gallery, souvenir store or even have dinner facing the atmospheric harbour of Oranjestad. The process of purchase is easy, whether you are abroad or on the island. Make an appointment through the website to visit the sales office when you are here. In that way you can actually see the unit, materials and amenities. If you are not on the island the website can help you out and the sales office is happy to send you all needed documentation for you to orientate. When agreed upon the unit you sign an agreement and move forward with the down payment which is \$ 50.000. At receipt of that amount the sales is closed and the price will not change. You know what you get and will not be surprised by price changes. The payment agreements after the deposit will be discussed and are flexible. Harbour House Aruba assist also in financing by banks.

For more information: <https://harbour-housearuba.com>. □





# Kohl's: buyout offers undermine value of business

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO

AP Retail Writer

**NEW YORK (AP)** — Kohl's says that recent offers to purchase the department store chain undervalue its business and said it's adopting a shareholder rights plan to head off any hostile takeovers.

The shareholder rights plan, which is effective immediately and is known as a "poison pill," is set to expire on Feb. 2, 2023, the company said Friday.

"We have a high degree of confidence in Kohl's transformational strategy, and we expect that its continued execution will result in significant value creation," said Kohl's Chairman Frank Sica in a statement. "The board is committed to acting in the best interest of shareholders and will continue to closely evaluate any opportunities to create value."

The move comes as Kohl's has received multiple buyout offers in recent weeks. Private equity firm Sycamore Partners had reportedly approached Kohl's about a potential deal last month. A group called Acacia Research, backed by activist hedge fund Starboard Value LP, bid \$64 per share, or about \$9 billion.

At the time Kohl's Corp., based in Menomonee



A shopper arrives at a Kohl's store in West Des Moines, Iowa, on Thursday, Feb. 25, 2021.

Associated Press

Falls, Wisconsin, said that its board was reviewing the offers.

The offers came just a week after activist hedge fund Macellum Advisors released a letter urging Kohl's to explore strategic options, including a sale, if the chain doesn't take action to improve its business and increase its stock price. The investor said it planned to nominate a slate of director candidates at Kohl's shareholders meeting this

year, unless Kohl's decides to embrace some changes.

Macellum Advisors, which owns nearly 5% of Kohl's outstanding common shares, issued a statement hours later, saying it was "disappointed and shocked by Kohl's hasty rejection of confirmed indications of interest."

"This morning's rejections only validates for us that a majority of the board is entrenched and lacks ob-

jectivity when it comes to evaluating value-maximizing sale opportunities relative to management's historically ineffective stand-alone plans," said Jonathan Duskin, Macellum's managing partner. "We doubt that interested parties were given adequate consideration or access to management, data rooms and the type of information required to inform upward adjustments to bids."

Duskin said that moreover,

it appears the board has not authorized its bankers to canvass the market and initiate substantive conversations with other logical suiters. He promised the company will try to prevent the current board from "continuing to chill a normal-course sales process."

In April 2021, Kohl's announced it was adding three independent members to its board of directors as part of an agreement it struck with a key activist investor group that included Macellum. In addition to Macellum, the group also included Ancora Holdings, Legion Partners Asset Management and 4010 Capital.

The retailer said Friday that it has designated its finance committee to lead the ongoing review of any expressions of interest. The committee is comprised exclusively of independent directors. Kohl's and the board is also working with financial advisers, including Goldman Sachs and PJT Partners, and have asked Goldman Sachs to engage with interested parties.

The company is set to update investors on its plans at its investor meeting on March 7.

Kohl's shares rose more than 2%, or \$1.28, to \$59.86 in afternoon trading Friday. □

# Cash-strapped Sri Lanka appeals to expats to send money

By BHARATHA MALLA-WARACHI

Associated Press

**COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP)**

— Sri Lanka celebrated its Independence Day on Friday with an appeal by the president to the country's expatriates to send money home as it struggles with the worst economic crisis in decades mainly due to depleted foreign reserves.

Sri Lankans are facing shortages of milk powder, cooking gas, kerosene and other essentials. Cash shortages have hindered imports of raw materials for manufacturing and worsened inflation, which surged to 12.1% in December.

The pandemic has dealt a heavy blow to an econo-

my that depends heavily on tourism and trade, with the government estimating a loss of \$14 billion over the last two years. The economy is estimated to have contracted by 1.5% in July-September 2021, according to the central bank.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa said Sri Lankans abroad who sent foreign currency back home are a major resource.

"I invite all expatriate Sri Lankans to invest in their homeland," he said in an address during a ceremony marking Independence Day in the capital, Colombo. A colorful military parade followed his speech.

Data shows that overseas remittances — the nation's

main foreign exchange earner— have fallen by nearly 60% to \$812 million in December from a year earlier. For the whole year, remittances declined 22% to \$5.4 billion. The drop came after the government ordered the mandatory conversion of foreign currency and exchange rate controls.

Because of the currency shortage, importers are unable to clear their cargo and manufactures are unable to buy raw materials from overseas.

Sri Lanka has borrowed heavily and faces repayments on \$15 billion in international sovereign bonds. Officials have said the government is gradually build-



Sri Lankan president Gotabaya Rajapaksa hoists the national flag of Sri Lanka during the country's Independence Day celebration in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022.

Associated Press

ing back reserves to ensure it can honor its debts.

"None of the crises we experience today are long term problems.

We can find solutions to

them with an optimistic approach," Rajapaksa said. "We have faced critical problems in the recent history as well and found solutions." □



# CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS 41 Settle, as

1 Touches a debt down

6 Tex-Mex shelters treats

11 Once more

12 Texas mission

13 Watch a second time

14 Farm machine

15 Shoe part

17 Pub pint

18 Sports drink suffix

19 More piquant

22 Road sealer

23 Writer Hemingway

24 Loafed around

25 Generic

27 Fall behind

30 Fanzine subject

31 Mess up

32 Pindar poem

33 Utah neighbor

35 Cruise vessel

38 Feasted

39 Biting

40 Without aid

DOWN

1 Rodeo rope

2 Meeting slate

3 Sadat's predecessor

4 Losing scheme

5 Scorned

6 Bar bill

7 Imitating

8 French port

9 Egg dish

10 More tender

16 Rhea of "Cheers"

20 Showed disdain for

21 Poet Hughes

24 They hold power

25 "Forget it!"

26 "Let me in!"

27 Use for support

28 Impassioned

29 Report-card data

30 Antithetical

34 Despicable

36 Greek vowel

37 Spanish king

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Yesterday's answer

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13						14				
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35			36	37		38				
39						40				
41						42				

2-5

AXYDLBAAXR  
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's. X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

2-5

CRYPTOQUOTE

CTZ SUJX DGU QTS UZOZH

DGAZE G DBECGAZ BE CTZ

DGU QTS UZOZH WSZE

GUXCTBUP. — CTZSWSHZ

HSSEZOZJC

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: IN COOKING, AS IN ALL THE ARTS, SIMPLICITY IS THE SIGN OF PERFECTION. — CURNONSKY

## Digital warfare tech at sea helping U.S. foes evade sanctions



Digital warfare tech at sea helping U.S. foes evade sanctions

By JOSHUA GOODMAN

**MIAMI (AP)** — Technology to hide a ship's location previously available only to the world's militaries is spreading fast through the global maritime industry as governments from Iran to Venezuela — and the rogue shipping companies they depend on to move their petroleum products — look for stealthier ways to circumvent U.S. sanctions. Windward, a maritime intelligence company whose data is used by the U.S. government to investigate sanctions violations, said that since January 2020 it has detected more than 200 vessels involved in over 350 incidents in which they appear to have electronically manipulated their GPS location.

"This is out of hand right now," Matan Peled, co-founder of Windward and a former Israeli naval officer, said in an interview. "It's not driven by countries or superpowers. It's ordinary companies using this technique. The scale is astonishing."

Peled said U.S. authorities have been slow to catch on to the spread of technology that has been part of the electronic warfare arsenal for decades but is

only now cropping up in commercial shipping, with serious national security, environmental and maritime safety implications. Windward was able to identify suspect ships using technology that detects digital tracks that don't correspond to actual movements, such as hairpin turns at breakneck speed or drifting in the form of perfect crop circles.

William Fallon, a retired four-star admiral and former head of the U.S. Pacific Command, said U.S. authorities have been aware for some time of the threat from electronic manipulation, one of a growing number of so-called "gray zone" national security challenges that cut across traditional military, commercial and economic lines.

"Any time you can deceive somebody into believing you're somewhere where you're not is concerning," said Fallon, who is now a board member of the American Security Project, a Washington think tank. "It illustrates the extent to which people who don't have any scruples are willing to go to achieve their objectives and the ease with which they can do it."

One of the more egregious

examples found by Windward involves a 183-meter-long oil tanker that could be tracked sailing to Iraq even as it was in reality loading crude in Iran, which is banned from selling its oil by U.S. sanctions.

The tanker, whose name Windward asked to be withheld so as not to disrupt any potential U.S. government investigation, set sail on Feb. 11, 2021, from the United Arab Emirates, reporting its destination as Basra, Iraq. When it was 20 nautical miles away, its global navigation system began exhibiting strange drifting patterns. Twelve days later, its transmission stabilized and it could be tracked heading back through the Hormuz strait at normal sailing speed, this time fully laden with crude. Satellite imagery shows that during the two-week voyage a ship of identical length and with the same red deck broken up by a white pole and bridge was spotted dozens of nautical miles away, in Iran's Kharg Island oil terminal. That vessel was then followed on satellite sailing back to the UAE, its course merging with the reported position of the original ship after it resumed its normal transmission.

Under a United Nations maritime treaty, ships of over 300 tons have been required since 2004 to use an automated identification system to avoid collisions and assist rescues in the event of a spill or accident at sea. Tampering with its use is a major breach that can lead to official sanctions for a vessel and its owners.

But what was intended as an at-sea safety mechanism has also driven a proliferation in ship-spotting platforms like MarineTraffic.com.

Experts say such websites can be easily tricked since they partly rely on data gathered from thousands of amateur base stations that function like police radio scanners picking up maritime movements. □

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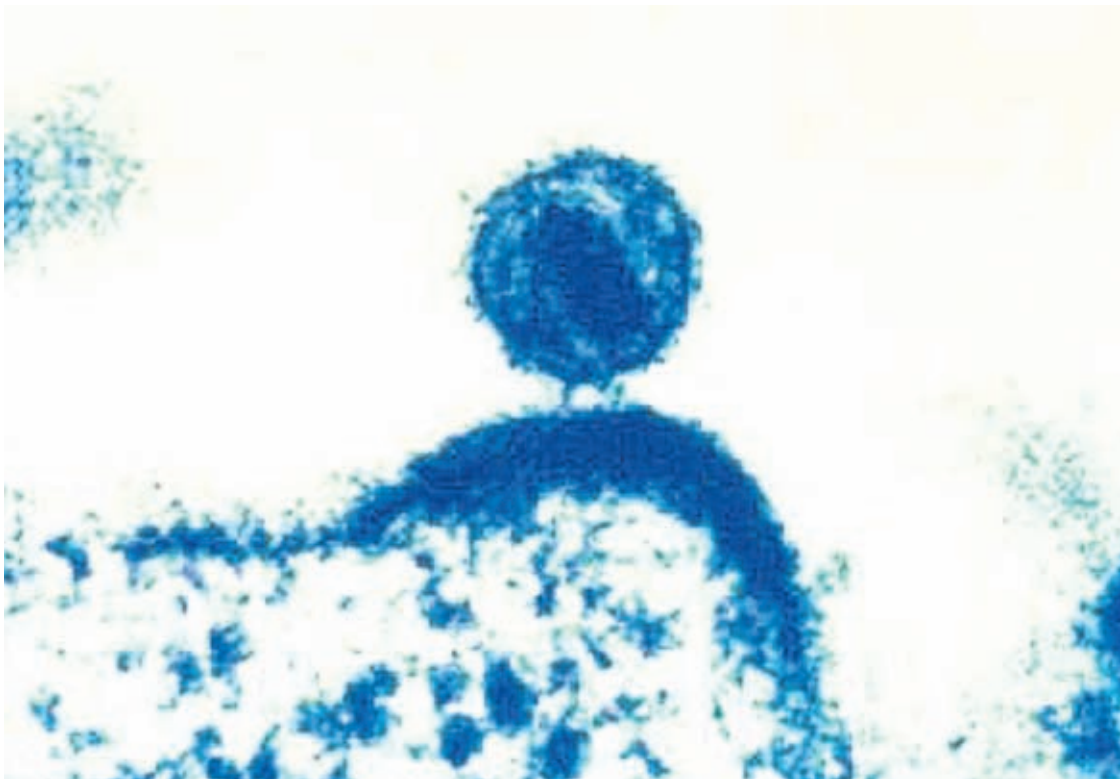
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## Study identifies virulent HIV variant unrecognized for years



Study identifies virulent HIV variant unrecognized for years

**By LAURAN NEERGAARD**  
**AP Medical Writer**

Scientists have found a previously unrecognized variant of HIV that's more virulent than usual and has quietly circulated in the Netherlands for the past few decades.

Thursday's report isn't cause for alarm: HIV medicines worked just as well in people with the mutated virus as everyone else and its spread has been declining since about 2010. It was discovered as part of efforts to better understand how HIV continues to evolve. The finding emphasizes the importance of good ac-

cess to testing and treatment so that whatever the variety, "HIV is suppressed as quickly as possible, which prevents transmission," Oxford University epidemiologist Christophe Fraser, the study's senior author, said in a statement.

Different HIV subtypes circulate in different countries, some more severe or transmissible than others. Subtype B is the most common in the U.S. and Western Europe. The Oxford team spotted 17 unusual cases while studying a database of European HIV patients -- people who had more immune damage and were

more infectious when they were diagnosed than is typical for subtype B.

Since all but two of those cases were from the Netherlands, the researchers next combed through thousands of Dutch records. They eventually identified a cluster of 109 people infected with what they're calling the VB variant, for virulent subtype B.

The cases date back to the 1990s and early 2000s, and have declined more recently, the researchers reported Thursday in the journal Science.

Before treatment, people with the VB variant had far

more virus in their blood and suffered more immune system damage than people with other HIV variants, the study found. It's not clear which of many viral genetic changes are the cause, but after treatment they fared the same as other HIV patients.

Finding this type of variant "is not a public health crisis," Joel Wertheim, a viral evolution expert at the University of California, San Diego, cautioned in an accompanying Science editorial. He wasn't part of the Oxford research.

It "does not appear to have led to a spike" in HIV cases, Wertheim said in an email interview. But the finding highlights how much is left to learn about why a long-spreading virus "still has the potential to evolve and adapt. As this current pandemic continues to remind us, we shouldn't underestimate the potential for viral adaptation." □



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# Our favorite crash-test dummies return in 'Jackass'

By JAKE COYLE

Pity those in charge of COVID-19 protocols on "Jackass Forever."

Imagine, just for starters, the challenges of monitoring the health of participants in something called the "Vomitron." I could describe this particular contraption of Johnny Knoxville's but the name pretty much speaks for itself.

Masks are seen here and there among the crew of "Jackass Forever," but they seem almost comical when, just a few feet away, someone is being drenched in pig semen or luring a hive of bees to their penis. Exposure isn't something to be mitigated in "Jackass," a bruised and fleshy world of saggy tummies, soiled underwear and so, so many testicles. It's a way of life.

It's also never seemed a particularly sustainable way of life. Just how many crotch shots can one take? But, more than 20 years after "Jackass" first premiered on MTV in 2000, Knoxville and company, now in their 40s and 50s, are still trying to answer such eternal questions while also pursuing some personal white whales like actually, finally lighting a fart on fire underwater.

"It's good to have dreams," someone says.



This image released by Paramount Pictures shows Machine Gun Kelly, left, Johnny Knoxville, center, and Steve-O, in a scene from "Jackass Forever."

Associated Press

What began as gonzo stunts carried out with the fearlessness of youth have steadily morphed into a protest against maturity. Knoxville's hair is now gray (though it sometimes switches in "Jackass Forever" back to dyed black) and the recovery times for Stephen "Steve-O" Glover and Jason "Wee Man" Acuña are presumably longer. One line more or less sums up their predicament: "He's bleeding. My hairline is receding."

But the daredevil this-is-so-stupid pranks are much the same, sometimes exactly

so. Knoxville again tussles with a bull, who leaves him concussed and with multiple broken bones. As he's stretchered off, his merry band applauds him with shouts of "Captain!"

Other things have changed, some of them unspoken. We know more now, for example, about the lasting effects of head trauma. The nastier bits of self-inflicted suffering also have strange echoes with the abuses of Abu Ghraib, which were likewise carried out with mugging for a camera. In the tradition of American torture, "Jackass"

is the Looney Tunes variety. But the "Jackass" ethos — that none of us are so precious that we can't survive a snake bite or a pogo stick to the groin — still has charm. The "Jackass" gang make for a rollicking antidote to the beautiful, unblemished people who play superheroes that never so much as bleed. Here, there are no such delusions about humanity. Theirs is a real-life Fight Club, just with a whole lot more cackling. Masculinity is a joke for the guys of "Jackass" but brotherhood isn't. The appeal of "Jackass" — now up to four

films, all directed by Jeff Tremaine — is so predicated on the group support and belly-laugh reactions around the stunts. Here, their impish band has been enlarged.

Along with regulars including Chris Pontius, Dave England, Danger Ehren and Preston Lacy are new additions like YouTube star Zach Holmes and surfer Sean "Poopies" McInerney. (Absent are Ryan Dunn, who died in a car crash in 2011 and Bam Margera, who has filed a lawsuit after being fired from the production.) Comedian Rachel Wolfson, the first woman to join the crew, gets in on the action in a segment called "Scorpion Botox." The largely white "Jackass" group is also joined by several Black members including Eric Manaka and Jasper, of Odd Future, along with his father. Guest stars include Machine Gun Kelly, Eric Andre and Tyler, the Creator. The only real membership requirement for "Jackass" seems to be that pain is universally shared — no one is exempt — and that afterward you can laugh it off. What good is a "triple wedge" if you can't share it with your pals? It's a formula that's been little changed in "Jackass" since its inception. But, you know. If it ain't broke. □

## Samuel L. Jackson to receive honor at NAACP Image Awards



Actor Samuel L. Jackson appears at the premiere of the film "Captain Marvel" in London on Feb. 27, 2019. Jackson will receive the Chairman's Award during the 53rd NAACP Image Awards this month.

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Samuel L. Jackson will receive

the Chairman's Award during the 53rd NAACP Image Awards this month.

The NAACP announced Thursday that it will bestow the 73-year-old actor with the award, which recognizes individuals who demonstrate "exemplary public service and use their distinct platforms to create agents of change."

"Many might not know that prior to his acting career, Jackson was a staunch activist during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, even serving as an usher at Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral," Leon W. Russell, chairman of the NAACP National Board of

Directors, said in a statement. "His continued public service and advocacy for social change make him an excellent recipient for the Chairman's Award." Previous recipients have included Tyler Perry, then-Sen. Barack Obama, Danny Glover, U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters and the late U.S. Rep. John Lewis.

Jackson, who has appeared in more than 100 films, is known for his portrayal of Jules in Quentin Tarantino's "Pulp Fiction" and as Gator Purify in Spike Lee's "Jungle Fever." He has starred in several other films such as "Do the Right Thing," "Unbreak-

able," "Snakes on a Plane" and multiple Marvel films including "The Avengers" and "Captain America: The Winter Solider."

The Oscar-nominated actor expects to star in the Apple TV limited series "The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey." He will receive an honorary Academy Award at the upcoming Governors Awards this year. Scot X. Esdaile will receive the activist of the year award. He is the president of the Connecticut State Conference of NAACP branches. The winners of the awards will be revealed during a BET broadcast on Feb. 26 at 8 p.m. Eastern. □



# The epicenter of U.S. speedkating is ... Florida?

By PAUL NEWBERRY

**BEIJING (AP)** — When one looks down the roster of the U.S. speedskating team at the Beijing Olympics, three names immediately jump out.

Brittany Bowe.

Erin Jackson.

Joey Mantia.

All three are among the world's best skaters and leading medal contenders at these Winter Games, but that's not what draws your attention.

It's the hometown beside each of their names.

The same city for all three. A place just north of Disney World that's known for producing some of the fastest thoroughbreds on the planet, earning the moniker "Horse Capital of the World."

It might be time for Ocala, Florida to tweak that nickname just a bit.

"We have fast horses," Renee Hildebrand bragged, "AND fast skaters."

Hildebrand deserves much of the credit for transforming sunny, warm Ocala — where the forecast Friday called for a high of 82 degrees not long after the Winter Olympics opened in frigid Beijing with Bowe as one of the U.S. flagbearers — into the epicenter of the U.S. speedskating world.

Just don't go looking for the ice skating rink.

They don't have one in Ocala.

"The closest one is an hour away," Hildebrand pointed out.

Which isn't really an issue for her, since she doesn't know how to ice skate.

Ocala does have a roller skating rink, and that's where Hildebrand thrives. She has this knack for spotting talented kids and coaching them on how to go really fast with wheels under their feet.

And, as it turned out, she had three of the most promising right in her adopted hometown. Heck, all three were born in the same hospital.

Training with Hildebrand's renowned team, Bowe and Jackson and Mantia developed into elite inliners, the



Brittany Bowe and John Shuster, of the United States, leads their team in during the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics, Friday, Feb. 4, 2022, in Beijing.

Associated Press

winners of multiple world championships before each made the transition to ice in pursuit of Olympic glory.

Their success, which was punctuated in recent months by Jackson's stunning emergence as the first Black woman to win a World Cup event, leaves Hildebrand feeling like a proud parent.

But her enormous satisfaction is tinged by a bit of sadness. "My kids," as Hildebrand still calls them, had no hope of getting to the Olympics with their first love.

Inline skating has been turned away time and time again in its bid to become an official Summer Games sport, and now seems to have lost whatever momentum it once had to get on an increasingly bloated program.

"People ask me all the time, 'Are you upset that all your best skaters go to ice?'" Hildebrand said. "Well, there's only so many world championships you can win before you become bored with it. All three had done that. They were ready for the next challenge. You have to be motivated, no matter what you do. But if inline was in the Olympics, they never would've switched to ice. They were happy doing their sport."

Their sport. Her sport. But a sport that could only take them so far.

Not far enough, it turned out.

The lure of the Olympics is strong.

"I wish inline skating was in the Olympics," Mantia said. "It definitely deserves to be." He still remembers the enormous drive that Hildebrand instilled in him at a young age, how she pushed him to be his very best. He wasn't thinking about the Olympics then. He just wanted to impress his coach.

"I always wanted to kind of show off for her," Mantia said after a training session at the dazzling Ice Ribbon oval, where speedskating begins on Saturday. "I always wanted to show her how good I could skate. It was a big motivation for me."

U.S. speedskating coach

Ryan Shimabukuro notices a common thread in all three skaters he inherited from Hildebrand.

"Skating is a very, very demanding sport, whether it's on ice or inline," he said. "She cultivated a hunger and a fighting instinct in them. When you make the transition over to the ice, no matter who it is, it takes time. She instilled them with a strong work ethic."

Hildebrand frets about the future of her sport, the one that's not in the Olympics, as the popularity of inline skating wanes in the United States.

Once a world powerhouse that produced other inline-to-ice stars such as Chad Hedrick, Derek Parra and Jennifer Rodriguez — Olympic medalists all — the American inline program has been left in the dust by a new world power, Colombia.

That doesn't bode well for maintaining a pipeline of

talent from non-traditional areas into the U.S. speedskating program, and almost certainly ends any hope of inline skating getting into the Olympics.

"I think I've given up," Hildebrand said, resignation in her voice. "I still had hope when we were on the short list, but golf and rugby got in ahead of us. I mean, the chance to have Tiger Woods in the Olympics? How could we compete with that?"

Hildebrand had planned to attend these Olympics, to cheer on those Ocala kids she played such a big role in developing, but the pandemic scuttled those hopes.

She's known for months that foreign spectators wouldn't be allowed — and that's all she would've been, since her inline coaching credentials don't hold any sway at the Winter Olympics — but the pain of missing out began to fester in recent days, like an old wound that had the scar ripped off.

"I thought I was kind of over it, but I'm not," Hildebrand said. "I can't even describe it. I just want to be there so bad. I can't tell you how bad I want to be there with them. I have so much pride in them. They've worked so hard."

But Hildebrand is not one to stay down for long, so she quickly shifts to her plans for the next two weeks. She'll be glued to the TV back in Florida, even though the 13-hour time difference means speedskating events will be held before the sun rises in the States.

She might even get together with the elderly patients she works with in her other job, as a physical therapist at an assisted-living facility. "They're the only people," Hildebrand quipped, "who get up that early." □



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